

“Subterranean Fires” and the “Weeds” of Asian Modernity in Lu Xun, Yosano Akiko, and Oba Minako

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It [the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*] is very close to the primitive magma. It has the appearance of a flow of lava which nothing could stop and which has remained formless.
—Roger Asselineau

[*Yecao (Weeds)* is] genuine poetry in embryo: images imbued with strong emotional intensity, flowing and stopping in darkly and oddly shaped lines, like molten metal failing to find a mold.
—Tsi-an Hsia

Three main pillars through which modernity reproduces itself in an East Asian context are the modern nation, the modern woman, and modern subjectivity. While none of these three categories are simply imported from the West, they are nonetheless reactions to violent shifts in the geopolitical tectonics. Just as modernity is often identified as a shock, an inversion, or a state of permanent crisis, one can also refer to it as a forced “awakening.” The “awakening,” extended metaphorically to encompass modern complex subjectivity, the modern nation, and gender identity, is provoked in this way, and yet it is also internally generated at a level deep beneath the surface, and the provocation merely provides the opportunity for its emergence.

Short-story writer, essayist, critic, and literary theorist Lu Xun (1881–1936; also transcribed as Lu Hsün) is acknowledged as the first Chinese author to write a modern-style novel thereby inaugurating modern Chinese literature and by extension modern subjectivity. He is almost invariably associated with China’s modern “awakening” as a nation. Yosano Akiko (1878–1942) was a Japanese poet and critic who developed a modern sensitivity in her poetry, and yet a kind of modern social consciousness that cannot be considered apart from the idea of the modern Asian woman. She can be regarded as an example of inner “awakening,” of eroticized sensuality combined with an “awakening” toward the social role of her gender. Oba Minako (b. 1933), on the other hand, dramatizes in her fiction the Japanese “awakening” after the nightmarish experience of World War II by linking it to her own experience of nomadic homelessness in Alaska. As a novelist belonging to the post-World War II generation, she offers a retrospective view of the process of Japanese modernization and to the uprooted state of the

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emancipated new woman. These three authors draw from the same subterranean vein of Asian modernity, and their interconnections—from the most literal to the most abstract level—can be linked in the notion of “weeds.” As there is much hidden under the geopolitical surface of modernity, literary and artistic creation still offers a view from beneath toward modernity’s inner landscape of emotions.

In this essay these three Asian writers will cross time and space in order to exchange the emotional charge of this multifaceted awakening to the modern, which takes root in their very different respective contexts. Contemporary scholars of affect, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in discussing “touching feeling,” show that modernity is not disconnected from such emotional investment: “the increasingly divergent physical scales ... that characterize the relation between touch and vision in the modern period result in understanding of texture that make it as apt to represent crises and fissures of meaning as metonymic continuities.”¹ What if Sedgwick’s “crises and fissures of meaning” are considered within the context of Asian modernity through the split between a traditional society and an emerging modern one, the inner split of feuding China and the inner Asian split of the Japanese aggression over China, the cracks caused by the Great Tokyo Earthquake in 1923 and the trails of World War II, down to its almost unbridgeable abyss? Perhaps in pursuing these “crises and fissures of meaning” by means of these three writers we discover “weeds” as the excess not of the premodern nor simply modernity, but as a function of the structure of inside/outside shifts and reversals in the moments of breaking through of the “awakening,” a function that exposes the arbitrary boundaries of modernity. “Weeds,” as Pierre Ryckmans says about Lu Xun’s *Weeds*, “will always trouble the totalitarian gardeners.”²

The “weeds” are a unique and tangible expression of the emotion of awakening, which takes over the content and reveals an aspect of Asian modern awakening that cannot easily be framed. This hidden aspect is precisely a texture, a organic-vegetal tissue, which, like Sedgwick’s interpretation of affect, comes closest to “touching feeling.” “Weeds” represent the palpable side of the drive to the modern, but they also stand for the emotion toward the new and the pathos of “breaking through.” “Weeds” are a dynamic sign of suppression and revulsion that best materializes the inner emotional pulsation on the borderline between the old and the new, the passive and the active, the traditional and the modern, the sleep and the awakening.

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003): 15–16.

² Pierre Ryckmans, *La Mauvaise Herbe* (Paris: Bibliothèque Asiatique, 1975) 51. Translations from the French are mine.

The awakening, like a Trojan horse, enters cunningly into the encapsulated box of the dream, says Walter Benjamin.³ At the same time, it is a desperate urge to escape the violent grasp of sleep. And the most painful, the most anxious part is at the boundary between sleep and awakening—the point where space in total darkness struggles to become time. Benjamin envies the successful depiction of such a delicate structure of awakening in some Chinese novels.⁴ Most would think immediately of the butterfly dream of Zhuangzi (Chuang-Tzu, ca. 369–298 B.C.), where the Taoist philosopher in a dream with all his senses shares the experience of a butterfly and is very confused upon his awakening about whether he is not really a butterfly dreaming of being the man Zhuangzi. But Lu Xun weaves and transforms that dream tale into his prose-poetry collection *Yecao*, a work written between 1924 and 1926 that shares a historical moment much closer to Benjamin's.⁵

Yecao is a collection of prose poems, each bearing a separate title. *Yecao* is normally translated as *Wild Grass*, and such organic-vegetal imagery is occasionally interpreted as something unimagined in the West. François Jullien is astonished at this vegetal image,⁶ which is the only possible fecundity in the void between pairs of opposites (past/future, light/darkness, friend/foe, hope/despair). He even sends us back to Virgil's *Georgics* for a reference.⁷ And this astonishing vegetal image is that of the "weeds." Pierre Ryckmans appears sensitive enough to this vegetal image, translating *Yecao* as "la mauvaise herbe" and leaving the work to speak for itself via translation into French, abandoning the literary critic's totalitarian ambition to analyze and dominate the work.

In his collection *Nahan* (Call to Arms), Lu Xun offers a powerful trope of oppression and emergence, sleep and desperate, useless awakening. It is the allegory of the iron house, a closed space where everybody is fast asleep and thus unaware of their inevitable suffocation and death. Awakening out of such a dream in such an iron house is equivalent in hope and despair to a rescue out of the dream, such as we find in Benjamin. It is hopeful, because of the acquired knowledge and the breakthrough of the senses; it is desperate in its powerlessness to demolish the iron walls. The awakened one can never solve the paradox of whether it is better to wake the others or to leave them to die

³ Walter Benjamin, *Paris, capitale du XIXe siècle: Le livre des passages*, trans. Jean Lacoste (Paris: Éditions Cerf, 1989): 409 (K2, 4).

⁴ Benjamin 406 (K1, 3). Benjamin is sensing the possibility of an expression of the dialectical schematism at the base of the process awakening/dream.

⁵ Xianda Lian, "Re-dreaming the Butterfly Dream," *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 3.1 (1999), sees Zhuangzi's butterfly dream as reappearing in Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman," emphasizing the duality and ambiguity of experience, in the latter case by replacing the dream/awakening dimension by the dimension of insanity.

⁶ François Jullien, *Lu Xun: Écriture et Révolution* (Paris: Presses de l'École normale supérieure, 1979).

⁷ In Virgil's poem one can find a dramatic picture of the fight of the farmer with all the invaders over his crop, the weeds first among his enemies. The parallel is even more interesting in Virgil's use of farming as an allegory of politics.

painlessly. Frederic Jameson uses another story by Lu Xun, “Kuangren riji” (Diary of a Madman)⁸, to suggest the idea of a merged subjective self that forms a collective identity in the national allegory of third-world literatures. Whether, to what extent, and how to apply or discard the label of “third-world literature” in connection with modern Chinese literature is not an easy problem, but the allegorical blend of the private and the national cannot be neglected. Thus, the iron house encloses a whole people, by extension a whole nation, ignorant and thus content with their destiny. The weed image is closely linked to the iron house allegory as it incarnates the attempt to break through the walls, only to find, however, there is no outside. Lu Xun’s preface to the collection *Yecao* explicitly links the image of the weeds to the essence of the prose poems that follow. The effect is of a narrative, fragmented in this case, that “can be folded back upon” itself “and become self-referential.”⁹ The self-referential narrative exposes its own content as a textuality that, in the case of the “weeds,” is indivisible from the sense of texture. The allegorical quality of the weeds in *Yecao* goes beyond the content of the prose poetry and swallows in itself the material aspect of the prose poetry—the very book itself with its earth-colored cover with two streaks of greenness, as if stitching together the sky and the earth at a place where the ground beneath them ends in an abrupt noncolored void.

Yecao is not only structured in a way vaguely leading from sleep to awakening or vice versa according to one’s reading, but it also is a piece of work overconscious of its own amorphousness and its organic feature of decay; in other words, its texture is palpable. The pathetic and yet futile, if nonetheless tangible, effort that strikes against unyielding iron walls, the irresolvable mixture of hope and despair, is best captured in the allegory of weeds as fire—both symbolic of life on the edge of death. This is also the materialization of the affectlike side of the “awakening” of revolutionary desire.

The past life has died....
 From the clay of life abandoned on the ground grow no lofty trees,
 only wild grass. For that I am to blame.
 Wild grass strikes no deep roots, has no beautiful flowers and
 leaves, yet it imbibes dew, water and the blood and flesh of the dead
 [securing its own life]. As long as it lives it is trampled upon and
 mown down, until it dies and decays.
 But I am not worried; I am glad. I shall laugh aloud and sing.
 I love my wild grass, but I detest the ground which decks itself with
 wild grass.

⁸ Frederic Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65–88.

⁹ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979) 205.

A subterranean fire is spreading, raging, underground. Once the molten lava breaks through the earth's crust, it will consume all the wild grass and lofty trees, leaving nothing to decay. But I am not worried; I am glad. I shall laugh aloud and sing. ... Between light and darkness, life and death, past and future, I dedicate this tussock of wild grass as my pledge to friend and foe, man and beast, those whom I love and those whom I do not love. For my own sake and for the sake of friend and foe, man and beast, those whom I love and those whom I do not love, I hope for the swift death and decay of this wild grass. Otherwise, it means I have not lived, and this would be truly more lamentable than death and decay.¹⁰

The wild grass that sprouts out of the debris of the past life is precisely the materialized allegory of "awakening" wherein life becomes the life lived. The wild grass becomes the allegory of the very shaky effort to awaken. Wild grass growing like weeds occupies a narrow margin between the earth and the sky, a narrow margin between two decays: the decay of past life and its own decay. Even though the wild grass tirelessly and eagerly secures its own life, its marginal existence is doomed from the start; its grounds for existence are at the expense of the very terrain that grounds its brief, fiery life. The wild grass is thus material proof of the futility of a thwarted effort. Wild grass sets proof of a past life's existence in decay, a proof of the awakening's mediocrity, but its decay also serves as proof of the awakened subject's existence. Just as Jean Baudrillard exclaims in *The Illusion of the End*,¹¹ when the things we touch and use stop getting used up, it only means that we ourselves cease to exist; the only proof of the subject's existence is in the all-consuming decay of the grass. Thus in the piece called "Hope" in *Yecao*, Lu Xun laments not so much the premature death of the Hungarian poet Sándor Petöfi (1823–1849), but instead the too-long life of his "hope," as reiterated in Petöfi's poem and personified in the allegory of the prostitute. The prostitute sells illusionary relationships that offer feelings of hope and, like Petöfi's poetry, shares the same immaterial quality of visions in a dream.

Yecao opens with a piece called "Autumn Night" and ends with one called "Awakening." If we adhere to the English translation, issued by the Beijing Foreign Languages Press in 1974, we can see the work's trajectory as moving from the sleep of night to the dawn's awakening. However, the last piece title bears a twofold meaning, that of awakening and dozing. In this piece the narrator is dozing off after having edited young writers' works all day, while in

¹⁰ Lu Xun, *Wild Grass* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1974). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *L'illusion de la fin ou la grève des événements* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1992) 143. The analogy is used in the example of the laser compact disc.

the end of the same piece, the same narrator awakes with a start. The final passage of the last prose poem reflects the structure of *Yecao* as a whole. The gesture of lighting a cigarette precisely mirrors the end of the first piece, "The Autumn Night," and the "long, long dream" is a prelude to the narrator's "awakening" to live in a "world of men," inspired by the rough, "bleeding" spirits of the young writers. The last scene of "Awakening" is significant also in that "the long, long dream" actually takes only as much time as it takes to smoke a cigarette. When the narrator wakes up with a start, he can still see the wisps of smoke rising from that same cigarette. The wild grass or weeds reemerge in the end to symbolize the rough spirit of the young writers. This weed spirit drags the narrator out of his "dozing" into the "world of men." It makes him remember an incident of several years before, when a young student speechlessly presented him with an issue of the magazine *Short Grass*. "He said not a word, yet what a speaking silence, and what a rich gift that was!" Just as Lu Xun in the preface dedicates the tussock of wild grass to friend and foe, the young student here offers him a tussock of immature, unpolished, but fiery, angry short grass:

Though the wild thistle is virtually crushed to death, it will still bear one tiny flower. I remember how moved Tolstoy was by this, how it made him write a story. Of course, when plants in the arid desert reach out desperately with their roots to suck the water deep below the ground and form an emerald forest, they are struggling for their own survival. Yet the tired, parched travelers' hearts leap up at the sight, for they know they have reached a temporary resting place. Indeed, this evokes deep gratitude and sadness. (67-68)

This passage toward the end of *Yecao* reverberates strongly with the piece "Hope." In "Hope," the narrator juxtaposes the vanished youth within himself and the hushed absence of the youths outside and around him. He quotes Petöfi's poem, where the allegory of the prostitute wasting away people's youth appears to personify "hope." In the final piece of "Awakening," the bombs over Beijing (the bombing of the northern warlord General Feng Yu-hsiang) only reinforce the feeling of calmness, but by editing the manuscripts of the young, the narrator senses the "short grass" of their silent anger. In this way, the above thistle passage is strongly linked to the passage following Petöfi's poem, where the narrator laments not the poet's death, but the sadness of his poem outliving him for so long. Yet it is this insistence on hope in the poem, underlined by the structure of the affect of hope, which traverses *Yecao* from the preface to the end. In the preface hope appears in the image of the weeds and the desire for their decay. In the last piece, this thread leads to the irony of the most emerald of forests existing in the desert. Even though it is nothing but a mirage caused by persistent hope, hope itself is an oasis where the drive forward and outward can be, at least in an illusion, satisfied. *Call to Arms* and *Wandering*, Lu Xun's previous collections, suggest by their very titles states of mind, whether pathetic elation or subdued confusion. Although the image of the "weeds" is both a rebellious call

to arms and a wandering image between light and darkness, past and future, it contains in itself some inscrutable opaque kernel of independent texture. It is symbolic of a state of oppression and a struggle for life, replacing itself an image of the past and the lost. "Weeds" share the greenness of hope and an unpretentious everydayness of disappointment, mirroring the amorphous modesty in the prose-poetic expressions of the emotions, and yet in the end existing as nothing but "weeds," indifferent to the gaze that discovers meaning in them. The mixed feelings of "gratitude and sadness" that travelers feel when coming upon the emerald forest is thus an "awakening" of hope even as it is also an understanding that there is no such thing.

The subterranean fire threatening at any moment to swallow the weeds of wild grass should be regarded not only as a pairing of images, but as an inseparable element of the weed emotion itself in Lu Xun. The fire appears in its allegorical form in the "Dead Fire" of *Yecao*, while later, in an essay evoking the Prometheus myth, it appears as a distortion into bombs and war.¹² The fire has a close affinity to the organic-vegetal image of the weeds not only because combustibility is the second most important characteristic of organic matter upon decaying, but also because of its desperate instability. The fire of "Dead Fire" is set in a narrative dream frame to show both sides and all the irony of a fiery life's impatience. The dreaming narrator satisfies his gaze in an immobile frozen fire caught in the dream. The fire is the weeds, in a sense, possessing only a momentary existence between the spark into life and inevitable death. For such images, wherein fire and vegetation are blended in a destructive embrace, Gaston Bachelard uses the term "a germ of image."¹³ This pivotal shift from the vegetally and organically inspired image of a seed or "germ" and the germ of an image is instrumental in our reflections on how the weeds mediate and represent our emotions, needing themselves to be weeded out (as with Petöfi's futile yet persistent hope or the writings of the young students that the narrator edits). This shift from the abstract to the concrete reduces the imagination to its smallest unit (the germ, or the awakening image) and requires an allegorical staging with as few referents as possible. In the end, the surrounding landscape becomes so abstract that it leaves behind a simplified scheme: past/future, friend/foe, light/darkness. Although rooted in the concrete experience of history (the fire as bombings), the imagination pulls up to the surface the subterranean prehistorical and posthistorical form of the myth and of literature as well, both occupying a liminal position as "small flowers on the edge of hell."

¹² Lu Xun, "Huo" (Fire) in *Lu Xun quan ji* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1973) 5: 197–99.

¹³ Gaston Bachelard, *La flamme d'une chandelle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961) 74–75. Bachelard concentrates on the expression "bûcher de sèves" (a bonfire of sap) and deduces important terms such as "graine sacrée d'un langage nouveau" (sacred grain of a new language), "nœud de puissance hostile" (knot of hostile force), and "le germe d'image" (the germ of image).

Another tussock of weeds appear in the Chinese language in the 1920s, namely, in the poem “Zassō” (Weed) by the Japanese poet Yosano Akiko. The poem was translated by Lu Xun’s younger brother Zhou Zuoren.¹⁴ Written in four stanzas, it introduces the image of the weed and is translated into Chinese as *yecao*, precisely the title of Lu Xun’s prose-poetry collection. The title *Yecao* is very appropriate for Lu Xun’s collection: a self-referential pose by the poet wishing the wild, fiery life, then decay of his “weeds.” Such negation toward the literary work itself is thus perfectly reflected in the title, as a refusal to name it; weeds, as we know, are the plants with no name. The performance of self-negation directed toward the contents of *Yecao* as an amorphous collection lacking in integrity also acts to avoid encapsulating the work in a fictional space all its own. The weed emotion of voluntary decay serves as a drive outward that links Lu Xun’s “weeds” to a poetic expression outside of his own work, outside of his gender, outside of his nation. This contagious spreading outwards results in the weedlike spread or dispersion of the work, which, intended or not, meets the desire of the narrator in the preface for the fiery decay of the weeds.

In her poem “Zassō,” to which Lu Xun (through his brother’s translation) may well have had access, Akiko applies a method of repetition wherein every stanza begins with an emergence of the weeds and ends by the word “greening.” The weeds are presented in turn as the “smart,” the “just,” the “pitiful” and the “noble,” illustrating each of these qualities with their “greening” presence, “by” the wayside, “over” every unevenness of the ground, “under” the hoofs of beasts, and “in” the rain and sun:

The weeds are the smart ones,
In fields and in towns, a path to men
They leave, greening.

The weeds are the just ones,
Every cavity, flatly,
Roundly they cover, greening.

The weeds are the pitiful ones,
The hoofs of beasts and the steps of birds,
They carry upon, greening.

The weeds are the noble ones,
In rainy days and in the sunny days

¹⁴ First it was Nicholas Kaldis’s dissertation on *Yecao* that made me think of the spark between Lu Xun and Akiko, then Song Yushi’s *Yecao Yanjiu* (again a reference taken from Kaldis) confirmed it. The most detailed study on the relationship between Lu Xun’s and Akiko’s use of weeds is Akiyoshi Shu, “Rojin to Yosano Akiko—‘Kusa’ wo baikai ni shite—” (Lu Xun and Yosano Akiko—mediated by “grass”) in *Kochijoshidaigaku Kiyo jinbunshakaikagakuhen* 45.3 (1997): 15–23.

They smile, greening.¹⁵

Even translated into Chinese (in which version it most probably reached Lu Xun's eye), the poem retains a palpable texture that, allegorically speaking, affects the weedlike fate and behavior of the poem. This texture is due partially to the material language in repetition of the weeds "greening," which mimics their growth and progressive spread. But most importantly, the poem weaves the weed imagery into a knotty, tangled pattern by reproducing the multidirectional paths that crisscross from all sides to the center, down, and up, retreating (making room for the cut of paths of men) and coming together (stitching the ruptures), bending down (being stepped over) and stretching upward. The symmetry in tension between the first two stanzas and the second two stanzas is maintained by presenting them as discrete sets. The first evokes the sphere of culture, the world of men (breaking paths and avoiding the impassable cavities); the second evokes the sphere of nature, the world of plants and animals. The first and third stanzas, then, are linked both by staging examples of the animate world: men, beasts, and birds. The analogy is consistent to the point that these two stanzas move in the direction in which weeds regress aside or downwards. The second and fourth stanzas are linked in that they represent the inanimate world, the earth and the sky, as they, too, form part of nature. The strongest connection, however, is formed by the increasing suppressive tension that moves downward from the human to the animal register and in the bursting counterreaction that moves toward recovery of integrity and victorious resistance to any atmospheric conditions in an idealistic upward movement. The elaborately chosen directions and registers in which the weeds' movement is represented create innumerable fibers that tie the images together. An excessive omnipresent emphasis on the weeds forms the basic structure and content of the poem. The repetitious pattern—"The weeds are ... greening"—creates symmetrical frames for the embroidery of the concrete visions of each stanza, evoking a deeper degree of organization, which is the fabric of the very emotion sang in the poem. This, of course, is reminiscent of Lu Xun's structure of repetitions in the preface to *Yecao*: "But I will laugh aloud and sing," which on the level of its contents is also a replica of the weed spirit. Thus, we can see how the texture of the emotion underlying Akiko's "weeds," and precisely because it belongs to an organic-vegetal imagery, compresses in a tense knot the bursting potential of the seed or "germ," which links in a chain reaction to other works, like *Yecao*. This is also a strategy, as we see from the first stanza of ingenious (smart) regression in order to increase the power of the leap forward or upward, the tactics of the Trojan horse.

¹⁵ *Yosano Akiko Zenshū* (Complete Works of Yosano Akiko) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1980) 10: 36–7. All translations are my own. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

The above poem was written in 1918, and its overly strong assertion bursts out of a period of Akiko's keen interest in the weeds. The concluding fragment of a piece of social criticism of 1915 shows how exclusively important the notion of the weeds must have been for the poet and feminist Akiko: "Weeds are growing. I have left one of the gardens without plucking them. Every morning while washing my face I cast a look on them and these derogatorily called weeds attract my heart in many ways. The flowers known to men are poor in inspiration, but the weeds by their name alone are a research topic to me. I want to compile a collection singing weeds' shape and elegance" (Akiko 15: 54).¹⁶ It is easy to see here the inversion that takes place between the weeds as something neglected and the weeds as an object of fresh attention. It is significant that Akiko's "discovery" of the weeds coincides with a certain moment of "awakening" as expressed by the gesture of washing one's face in the morning. As this concise fragment serves as a conclusion, or a final touch to the ten pieces of Akiko's criticism in *Kyōshintōgo*, it is important to consider how rhetorical threads of logic and feeling consistently passing through the other pieces are bound up and knotted in this last piece. The poem "The Virgin and Sexual Desire" is based on Akiko's appreciation of the play "Salome" not as a realistic representation (as a virgin could not have such a strong desire), but as a symbol of love that transcends gender, class, and culture (East/West). "Women and Political Activism," on the other hand, starts with indignation toward the prohibition of women to vote, which escalates into a refutation of the traditional view that a woman should tend only to women's business. An important rhetorical tool here, as in "The Virgin and Sexual Desire," is the key use of the notion of "desire" (*yokkyū*). She thus directs her criticism at the domestic affairs minister Ōura as a despot who "neither understands nor respects human desire." Such human desires are shared by women and men and it is the same urge that drives progress. The desire not only serves as a driving force to progress (*shinka* or *kaizō*), but itself reflects the very movement forward, as "human desire progresses and at times, violently." Translated into political terms, this progress in desire lays the groundwork for democracy and "neo-idealism." By the end of this second piece, Akiko has rhetorically welcomed the forces of oppression as necessary stimuli for the emergence of free thought rooted in the constitution. Similarly, she expects a reappraisal of neo-idealism both in England and France after World War I. The reference to sexual desire as a human desire that cannot be controlled once unleashed in the first piece thus curiously flows into the political discussion of the second essay, where women, once encouraged by democratic neo-idealism, cannot be deprived of their rights.

"Summer Is Here" starts with a description of vegetal and animal life within the turbulent arrival of summer, when "light and aroma, and color, and sound are burning, springing, melting, flowing." This powerful, allegorically

¹⁶ The fragment first appeared in the journal *Taiyō* (Sun) 6 (1915): 39–46, as the concluding part of ten pieces of social criticism combined under the title *Kyōshintōgo*.

represented green-clad “nature” challenges the narrator of the piece. Although “nature” is so absorbed in her work and so overwhelmingly swallowing everything on her way, the narrator of the piece, by her very defensive—or aggressive—gesture of taking up her writing brush, refuses to get absorbed: “However, Nature, I am neither your child nor your friend anymore. Humans are your craftsmen. Humans cannot but subordinate you, improve you and perfect you. With my tiny strength I join the team of humanity.” In a very private staging, the study room, the violent progress in human “desire” is restaged. And while in the previous piece, “Women and Political Activism,” the oppressive force was political despotism or war, in “Summer Is Here” that same force reappears as the power of “nature,” which can nevertheless use her soft power for subordination. Why “nature,” which at first sight might be seen as the very personification of the swelling “desire,” is taken as a challenge becomes clear in the next piece.

“Creative Life” starts with a denial of “eternity” and the “past,” contrasting them with the human privilege “to use humans themselves and nature as raw materials for improvement.” Nature’s drive does not much differ from this drive to perfection, but its pace is slow and numb. And among humanity it is the woman that has been mimicking nature’s numbness, remaining “part of nature,” belonging to the “past” and to “eternity.” The allegorical apparition of “nature” in “Summer Is Here” might be reinterpreted in this new light, then, as the inner female “nature,” whose attraction is in her passivity and vanity. In “Creative Life” an important switch takes place, however, where “nature” and “humanity,” so distinctly opposed in “Summer Is Here,” get twisted and collapsed into a “breakthrough” (*toppatsu*) emotion. “Occasionally a breakthrough or a sudden change [*kyūhen*] take place in nature. But it is the breakthrough and the sudden change that are the attributes of modern men.” This pathological emotion of modernity comes as an “awakening from the fixedness of the past and the stagnation of eternity.” The concept of “crafting” (“artificiality,” *jinkō*) thus is embedded at the heart of the “creative life” guided by the drive for improvement and perfection. “A grand crafting is breaking through, transcending past and eternity.” This “grand crafting” driven by an internal impulse of nature (*honnō*), or instinct, materializes itself in Marie Curie’s discovery of radium and the movement for women’s rights in the West, two overlapping examples situated on the opposite poles of nature and politics. “Creative Life” concludes with an allusion to the fleshly desires of the virgin that might be “breaking through,” thereby upsetting the conclusion of the first piece, reinforcing not any logic so much as the strained emotion of a “breakthrough.”

“Following One’s Desire,” in an exquisite way, elaborates on the “creative life” of the previous piece. A life harmonious with one’s inner desires is the real and sincere life, which includes a suppression of some desires in order to achieve bigger ones. What is important here is the development of the term “crafting” from the previous piece into the notion of “harmony,” reconciling and

reinforcing the tension between “nature” and “artificiality.” The terms “graceful,” “subordinate,” and “well-rounded” (*enman*) construct the old concept of “harmony.” But borrowing a futurist poetess’s words, Akiko discards the rounded shape of the circle in favor of “splitting and advancing in leaps and bounds shape of the angle.” Besides this unnamed futurist poetess, Akiko refers to Van Gogh and Picasso’s art to illustrate her desire for a life “sharp-edged and many-angled,” where true “harmony” expresses itself as a “whole man’s deep emotion [*kangeki*] and tension of grasping a new truth.”

The next piece, “The Women Journalists Club,” returns to a more immediate social topic, the establishment of a female journalists’ club. Akiko situates the female journalists on the edge of women’s “modern knowledge” and turns an envious gaze toward their freedom. She ardently wishes that this women’s organization would become the preexperience of the rest of women without turning simply into a place for social exchange. This would secure a dynamic role of a “electric generator” for “new thought and new movements.”

“Before and After Artistic Creation” is a return to the setup of “Summer Is Here,” since the piece deals with the tension of artistic creation inside the poetess’s study. In the original issue of the work it is divided into two parts, emphasizing the tension of “before” and “after” the moments of self-assertive creation. The first half opens with the words “There are days when I cannot understand my own self,” to which corresponds the beginning of the second half: “There are days when I clearly see my own self.” Compared to an astral eclipse, the unpleasant and painful days of darkness are crossed as if by a flash of lightening by the “creative desire” (*seisakuyoku*). That is when she falteringly takes her writing brush in a gesture of challenge as in “Summer Is Here.” She composes *tanka* verse without being bound by conventional poetic form and she also composes modern poetry in an amateurish free way. To see her whole self clearly, she has to come back to her creation after a while. However, the whole of the self is a disappointing collage of ugliness and beauty, strength and weakness. The whole self, although torn by contraries, evokes the new concept of harmony in tension, but even so, it is discarded as evidence of insufficient progress. Without looking back, she starts writing again, screaming in her heart: “Neglect the past!”

In the next piece, “‘Truth’ and ‘Verity,’” the concept of truth, shared by the East and the West, is seen as traversing the individual and the social order. If the morality of the individual and that of all humanity are in contradiction, then one of them must be false. “Neither intelligence, nor usurpation, nor violence can be compared to the power of truth, which is the ultimate human desire.” She uses this rhetorical tool against the contemporary politics of Japan, and especially the occupation of Qintao.

"Mrs. Irisawa Tsuneko" stages a conversation with the character from the title. When the narrator says that she gives her daughters boys' books to read and vice versa, Irisawa answers that she distracted her boy by making him knit while he was feeling sick. The short piece ends by an exclamation on how the woman, the housewife, by ingenuity ("crafting") and economizing can contribute to the wealth of the state. Here, in a very casual context, we see the workings of the crafting device that pierces and turns upside down the conventional "nature." The forces that move in opposite direction (economizing/gaining) correspond in evocativeness to the sexual desire of the immaculate virgin; both of them are dynamic formulae for the tense emotion of "breaking through."

This series ends with the piece "Weeds." Each time the word "weeds" is repeated in this last short fragment, it carries with it the rhetorical and emotional density of all the rest of the essays. Key terms such as "breakthrough," "nature," "past and eternity," "truth and desire," and "crafting" appear charged with greater impact in the image of the weeds. The tension is much more perceptible as the image of the weeds simultaneously swallows the abstract rhetoric of the preceding passages and remains aside and apart from it in its unique material concreteness. In other words, the "weeds," by elaborately and "craftily" weaving into its image all the essays' emotionally tense dynamics, create a certain mass of tangled coarseness, which becomes the sedimented, overdetermined texture "hovering" beneath the collection overall.

In addition to this series, Akiko wrote others in the period around 1915. Looking through them one can find other links to the emotion of "awakening." As we saw from "Following One's Desire," Akiko is conscious of a futurist poetess, which reminds us of the international aspects of the growing emotion with which she is concerned. The emotion of awakening can thus be situated on the blaze of the futuristic wave that swells in 1909 in Europe and reaches the Japanese coast only three years later in 1912.¹⁷ Valentine de Saint-Point's "Manifesto of Lust" (1913)—it exclaims, "Lust is the quest of the flesh for the unknown, just as Celebration is the spirit's quest for the unknown. Lust is the act of creating, it is Creation"—accords with Akiko's discussion of fleshly desire and its analogy in creation. But as we learn from Henry Adams's discovery of the

¹⁷ It is worthwhile to consider the fact that it is Akiko's husband Yosano Hiroshi, founder of the New Poetry Society and the literary journal *Morning Star*, who selected and translated an anthology of futuristic poetry in 1912 under the title "Lilac blossom" (*Lila-no hana*). The first extensive study on the subject is likely Chiba Sen'ichi, "Nihon ni okeru Miraiha no Shōkai to Eikyō – Nihonkindaishishi no saikentō" (The Introduction and Influence of Futurism in Japan—A Reconsideration of Modern Japanese History of Poetry), *Kokugokokubun Kenkyū* 33.3 (1966): 60–84, which shows the amazing simultaneousness of the literary movement in Europe and Japan. This simultaneousness is not fortuitous: "Lilac Blossom" stems from Yosano Hiroshi's stay in Paris in the previous year, where Akiko visited him. Most relevant to our discussion, however, is the fact that Akiko wrote a novel in which she relates the everyday life of her family before Hiroshi's departure. The nervous breakdown of Hiroshi was the reason for his trip to France. The title of the novel *Akarumi-e* (To [Day]light) delicately introduces the thread of the emotion of awakening into that experience too.

incredible magnetism between the epitome of spirituality that “the virgin” represents and the cutting edge of science that “the dynamo” stands for, such emotional elation is a dynamic swirl of modernity’s duality. Such a dynamic swirl not only directly links itself to Akiko’s paradoxical “sexual desire of the virgin,” but points to a certain tendency to yoke together extremes, itself the climate that will lead to the atomic age.

Both Akiko and Adams discuss their fascination with the discovery of radium. The discovery represents the essence or victory of one woman’s venture into the depths of nature via science. Radium itself serves as kind of a double-bind metaphor: on the one hand the process of discovery, which represents the sphere of the rational, the scientific side of modernity; and on the other hand the element itself, which is essentially a part of nature, its core heavy and dense, and which represents, through its radioactive qualities, nature’s unpredictable outward drive. Radium is a substance that swallows and spits out the strained emotion of modern awakening. Hence it is a symbolical substance, which in one of Lu Xun’s earliest writings, “On Radium” (1903), by its luminosity almost replaces the sun after the dark pre-modern night of superstitions. Later on, for example in Oba Minako’s works, this replacing of the sun will clearly not only be reflective of modernity, but also self-reflective of modern humanity, which, by means of the atomic bomb (in turn preconditioned by the discovery of radium), showed itself capable of self-destruction.

In the beginning of a patchwork-style essay, “Areya Koreya” (“This and That,” Akiko 15: 65–72), Akiko gives an example of the sense of smell. This sensation can be linked to the self-contradictory and tense emotions of hope and awakening. The importance of this sense of smell in discussing emotion is that it is the “most sensitive” and “the most delicate” in evoking an association, or in other words, containing in itself the subterranean vein that flows between two completely unrelated experiences. Thus Akiko evokes her trip to Paris by inhaling the exhaust from the cars on the Tokyo streets. Right after her description of this experience, she argues that the life of the Japanese is superficial due to their use of opinions unrelated to direct experience. She says in relation to Japanese women that they always base their judgment on whimsical ideas and thus share many stereotypical views on things. The above two fragmentary considerations, on the association of smells and the notion of trivial experience, serve as a prelude to an interesting passage on fashion, which blends in itself the freshness of the new and the self-“crafting” of women. In the way in which the normally unpleasant smell of automobile exhaust becomes a meaningful vehicle of the material experience of Paris and even overshadows the flower perfume, each notion can be enriched, invigorated, and refreshed by being refracted through the texture of emotion into one’s direct experience. In the same way, looking back at the cultural critique series bound by the “weeds,” the “weeds” part is the one that stresses most of all such tangible directness. All of

Akiko's observations on politics, society, art, and everyday life are refracted, and thus associated among each other, by "her" weed-grown garden.

In another essay of 1915, "The Body and Stamina of the Japanese," she links the feeling of lack (of something tangible) to the lack of "violent desire" and a "will to live." Both terms are already tightly fixed to the image of weeds. What cannot go without commentary is the preoccupation on a literal level with sleep and "awakening." "On the steam train, on the electric train, on the horse train and other means of public transport, the Japanese, men and women alike, often doze.... Really, the Japanese often doze during the daytime. The students doze in the classroom. The ministers and the representatives doze in the Parliament. The audience dozes sitting at a sermon or a lecture.... One has to start [by changing] one's own self. One has to wake up by triggering one's desire to live [*seikatsuyoku*] which is eaten by lethargy and transform it into something lively and active with a will to live burningly rather than lukewarmly, powerfully rather than feebly, deeply rather than superficially" (Akiko 21–24). It might be that the very organic characteristics of the sense of smell can pull the sleeping subject away from the grasp of sleep or the dream. All organic matter is subject to decay and, like rotting weeds, can produce a foul odor. Car exhaust—the result of the burning of fossilized organic matter—makes Akiko reexperience her trip to Paris. Thus, Akiko blends her modern coquettishness in the visit to the capital of fashion and her excitement about modern technology represented by the automobile within a deeper swirl of emotions, tangibly experienced. It is where another thread of the weed imagery blends into Akiko's discussion. In an earlier essay she laments a world where nothing changes and that is covered by imperishable weeds. In another she cautions that remaining ignorant and passive equals the destiny of "decaying along with the weeds" (Akiko 14: 385 and 15: 10). This feeling of dissatisfaction with the imperishable weeds as well as with the decaying weeds shows to what extent this rhetoric is linked to a confused swirl of emotion with a vague and multiple target. Imperishable weeds would not decay, nor emit a foul odor, and thus not be able to connect to any tangible experience. On the other hand, the decay of the weeds, almost in the sense of Lu Xun, is a source of rejoicing and hope, and a shift to the decay of "nature," the "past," and their attribute the conventional "woman." Akiko personalizes further the weed in symbolic expression of the self, caught uniquely in the emotion of striving upward and challenging forward and at the same time again closing in on itself as a compact, independent image: "Not to die, to live till the end, / The soul, imploring itself; / Unyielding to the lofty trees, / Although I am weed."¹⁸

This pull toward modernity is, in its most literal sense, a desire for change and renewal. It appears as the germ of emotion, an awakening organically tangled in the image of the weeds. It imbibes from a historical and social sense of awakening, contextualized in the cataclysm of World War I, the wave of

¹⁸ Akiko 9: 278–89. Abbreviated.

futurism, and most of all the pan-natural democratic vistas of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.¹⁹ The following verse, first entitled "The Weed's Song" (*Zassō-no Uta*) and later renamed "Leaves of Grass" in the fashion of Whitman's poetic imagery, shows the frailty of the "breakthrough" of the weed and also shows a modern "awakening" as a pure emotion with a nuance from hope into sadness (not unlike the mixture of gratitude and sadness at the emerald forest in Lu Xun). While enthusiastically eulogizing the "weeds," Akiko also perceived the sadness of the limit undermining such enthusiasm, the relativity of progress, and the arbitrariness of shifting historical boundaries. The transparent elegance of this feminine leaf of grass is almost dissolved in the realization of its transience, yet the poetic gaze does not give up in searching for meaning in this same grass. In its most ephemeral form, this "sad weed" manages to keep in itself some thickness, associating it with "the heterogeneous chip that slips through the ideological net" by "the explosive power of the inconspicuous"²⁰:

Above the grass
 Even higher
 Just a stem of
 Two *shaku* of protruding grass.
 Frail, thin,
 Slim four, five leaves
 In the morning cool
 Hanging down and drawing
 A feminine curve.
 You, gentle grass,
 You, short-lived grass,
 All over your body,
 In spite of the essence of sapphire,
 In the early May
 A feel of autumn.
 Green, glittering sadness,
 Oh, grass,
 Is it all of you? (1920)

(Akiko 10: 99–100)

In post-World War II literature, a modern woman, concentrating all her existence in a desire to be free, to be modern, appears in Oba Minako's novel *Hana to Mushi no Kioku* (The Memory of Flowers and Insects).²¹ Significantly

¹⁹ In 1912, a translation of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was made by the famous writer Arishima Takeo. The inner sides of the covers of the first two-volume edition of this translation are filled with drawings of vegetation created by the translator. They show how immediate and literal the imagery of grass figures in the modern Japanese poetic experience. In 1919, the centenary of Whitman's birth was celebrated in Japan. The festivities coincided with a democratic elation.

²⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981) 56–59.

²¹ Serialized in *Fujin Koron* 1978.1–1979.2.

enough, Maki's self-definition, especially against her mother, but also against the social norms, takes material shape in the image of a weedlike "wild grass" (*yasō*). The female protagonist, Maki, becomes the lover of a rich businessman, who used to be in love with her mother. After her mother had married her father, the mother gradually lost her charm and turned into a mediocre housewife, dedicated to her husband and children. The young Maki revolts against her father for choking the beauty of her mother and chooses a life of luxury instead, using her female charm and youth as tools. After seducing the son of her lover in a one-night stand hotel, she remembers a scene from her childhood in which her mother, who is already gaining weight, takes both her and her younger brother outdoors to collect insects for a school project. The three of them sit by a brook under a tree, all covered by a flowering crimson trumpet creeper. The beautiful flowers attract some black butterflies the heroine (then a young girl) wants to catch. By the edge of the brook, there are some small white flowers, as if blurred with blood, to which the butterflies remain indifferent. The young Maki wants to climb high up the tree, to become a trumpet creeper, although the plant is poisonous and cannot stand up by itself. Her mother, on the other hand, in this allegorical scene of memory, merges completely with the small crushed flowers of the wild grass. The allegorical landscape remains in the deepest layers of Maki's memory, and her striving to become a modern emancipated woman takes the shape of suppressing any possibility of repeating the plain life of her mother, or trampling down the wild grass in herself.

In the contemporary urban environment, the same allegorical landscape reappears in the flowerpots on Maki's neighbor's balcony. The wild grass's white flowers are taken care of by a nightclub host, who unexpectedly seems to be nostalgic of the countryside. Thus the wild grass image creeps into the post-World War II emotional landscape of the modern woman and of the modern dweller of boxlike apartments of urban civilization.

The wild grass, or the weeds, as a mnemonic trigger brings back the emotional charge of the Asian instinct toward change and modernity as we have seen in Lu Xun and Akiko. At the same time, the weeds are also an image of survival after the devastating results of that same modernity. Just as in Jill Paton Walsh's novel *Fireweed* (1969), the wounds of the city of London are covered by the fireweed. The fascination with and the skepticism toward modernity, material and spiritual, result in juxtaposing history and myth. In the way Lu Xun evokes Prometheus' fire, the germinal form of human technology, Oba Minako refers to the atomic bomb as to a kind of "second Prometheus."²² The post-World War II awakening makes once again apparent the dimension of the "dream,"

²² Oba Minako, *Oba Minako Zenshu* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991) 10: 105. All translations are my own. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in the text in parentheses with volume and page number.

suggesting an experience of history as awakening from a dream into a continuum of dreams like infinite reflections in opposing mirrors.

In 1974, forty years after the publication of Lu Xun's *Yecao*, Oba Minako published a collection of essays under the title *The Dream of the Wild Grass*.²³ The book itself appears as a "dream" or an aspiration to merge with Lu Xun's work. This emotional attachment to Lu Xun's weeds in Oba Minako's context is very deeply rooted in the post-World War II experience. Oba speaks of her experience of a postwar "wasteland" just like the one Eliot experiences after World War I in Europe. However, in Oba we can see a focus on Asianness, and this twist is carried on by the imagery of the weeds leading directly to the work of the Chinese writer Lu Xun: "Nevertheless, while seeing off the back silhouette of Eliot, who despised chaos and sought refuge in God, I am still sitting amidst chaos, reciting with a very eastern serenity Saigyō or Bashō and shedding tears at the memory of Lu Xun. Recently I took out of the old bookshelf the literary theory of Valéry and reading it I thought how good it is, but his poetry did not move me. Then I reread Lu Xun, whom I met by the same time and I was violently shaken and I wept at night again remembering him. Ah, I would be happy if only I could turn into Lu Xun's wild grass."²⁴

The image of Lu Xun, very deeply entangled in the image of the weeds, has an important, almost tangible, presence in Oba's literary world, which can be seen in the essay "With Lu Xun," the very title of which emphasizes the sense of togetherness: "I first met Lu Xun's works in the year of my graduation from university" (Oba 10: 257). "Since I first met Lu Xun, he is always beside me. Two years ago, when I compiled a collection of essays, I entitled it 'The Dream of the Wild Grass.' Lu Xun is dead, but he lives inside me. Whenever I try to whisper something, I am startled to find him lurking behind me. Sometimes he presses my shoulder with his hand. He has grown cold, but I can hear the sound of flowing blood" (Oba 10: 259). This passage illustrates forcefully the tangible presence of Lu Xun, carried through time and space by the organic persistence of the weed imagery. The intricate experience of Lu Xun not merely as a transparent ghost, but as an apparition linked to vitality by the blood flow, is an experience turned backward to the origin of literary expression and to the starting point of Asian modernity, where the vital element is the same emotion of awakening. In the collection *Rusty Words*,²⁵ Oba conserves her first literary verse pieces from 1952 and 1953. In the end she explains how she burnt all her early prose works (not unlike Akiko's ignoring of her early works), but couldn't somehow throw away the poetry. From Oba's words it seems that the poetry has some specific life of its own and, very much in the manner of the weeds,

²³ Oba Minako, *Yasō-no yume* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1974).

²⁴ Oba Minako, *Yasō-no yume*, Preface.

²⁵ Oba Minako, *Sabita Kotoba* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1972). All references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically as RW in the text.

unyieldingly pushes up its way. It is in one of the poems, "Satsujin-no Machi" (The Murderers' Town, RW 94–96)," where Lu Xun first appears. In the poem the "I" reads Lu Xun, while the town outside her tiny room is torn by murders, confusion, and factory noise. In this manner, the "I," in order to survive the nightmare of the poor factory suburb, clings to Lu Xun's "weeds" for escape from that nightmare. From another essay we can see how touching the encounter with Lu Xun's book was. It happened in a small bookshop located in the poor factory suburb, one typical for the 1950s (Oba 10: 334–37). She writes about it almost as of a destiny encounter, which refers again to the characteristic of resilience of the "weeds" transferred to the tangible existence of the collection as a book. In the end of the collection "Dream of the Wild Grass," Oba, again in a vegetal metaphor, muses over the long period of hibernation of the seed of her literary writing. It is not an exaggeration to imagine that that same seed was carried on by Lu Xun's "weeds."

While talking about the origin of literature, she points at some primitive amorphousness that resembles the dream or the tale. Natsume Sōseki's *Ten Nights of Dream* (1974) is given as an example of this mythical texture of literature. It is very touching to see how Oba's fascination with *Ten Nights of Dream* has provoked a unique and personal creative experience transplanted into *Oregon's Ten Nights of Dream*. It is in the same manner that she has appropriated Lu Xun's *Wild Grass* by bringing to its surface the dream dimension into the *Dream of the Wild Grass*. In this context of the germlike state of literature we find an unexpected reference to Yosano Akiko: "Growing Up"—a collection of childhood recollections designated for young audiences, written in 1914 (Oba 10: 221–23). This work is so marginal that it has not even been included in Akiko's collected works, but Oba handles it with care and importance. In one of the pieces, "Fire," Akiko describes a childhood memory of a fire in a brewery that killed its owner, a beautiful maiden. Most of the adults forgot about that accident, but the little girl could never erase the painful memory of the image of blackened corpses, even though—or precisely because—the site was overgrowing with weeds.